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By Colin Clarke

A welcome and vibrant disc exploring new music for piano trio and piano quartet.

Both artwork (by “psychological pop” artist Jerry Kearns) and video (Carlton Bright) are elements of Russel Steinberg’s *Paleface*. The artwork is reproduced in the booklet. An exploration of the American hero myth, one might initially see correlations with the aesthetic of Michael Daugherty, but Steinberg’s music goes deeper while maintaining a descriptive surface. The idea of the American hero, posits the composer, operates on many levels of contemporary society. Even Jesus, not particularly American last time I looked (although who knows Trump might requisition him at some point) “plays a lurking role”. From galloping cowboys to folksongs and hymns, film noir and pulp fiction, *Paleface* explores them all. The three movements are: “Wild West”; “Action Hero”; “Into Night,” with the final movement exploring icons as ghosts. Steinberg uses extended piano techniques in “Wild West”: strumming of the strings, tapping the steel bars and so on. It all coheres beautifully; and it is fun, too. The central panel is a scherzo that includes a brief part for kazoo (the arrival of which comes as something of a surprise if you haven’t read the booklet notes in advance). It is all great fun, a depiction of superheroes, secret agents and cartoon chases. Easy to overlook the tightness of the performance then, superbly done here. The work ends with an Adagio, reflecting that depth I referred to earlier. Our superheroes are now, in the words of the composer, thrust “into the night of today’s post 9-11 world”. A gospel anthem surfaces, itself eventually transformed into a ghost. A fabulous work, way more profound than I first expected on reading the booklet notes.

Five stars: A welcome and vibrant disc exploring new music for piano trio and piano quartet.